



Church Youth Group Schemes a Plot To Build a Community Garden

Intervention Summary

St. Elizabeth's Catholic Church in Desert Hot Springs owns vacant property, which was overrun by weeds and trash, close to the church building. The church had been supporting nutrition education classes provided by NEOP-funded staff on a regular basis. The idea of a community garden on the vacant lot drew interest from the priest, as he was trying to connect the Pope's message of being good stewards of the planet. This inspired the youth to request a small community garden area at the church. After countless meetings and valiant persistence, the priest agreed to allow the youth attending catechism class to build and maintain a community garden. The youth attending the church became very excited, as they were looking for a way to give back to the church, while learning how to build and maintain a garden, not only at the church, but at home as well.

With the priest's approval, the labor began – clearing the lot space, building garden boxes, and fixing the irrigation system – completely organized by the church youth group. The youth had very little experience doing some of the tasks, so they sought the help of family and church members to help. Before they knew it, they had professional carpenters, landscapers and plumbers donating their time to build the community garden. A total of 8-10 youth assisted in the building of the community garden on a weekly basis, while adults provided guidance to the group, while lending their talents and tools. A local resident finishing her degree in horticulture had heard about the project, and she volunteered to teach classes at the church to instruct others about starting home gardens. The community garden is currently growing cabbage, spinach, lemons, limes, grapefruit, and oranges, just to name a few. The harvest of the community garden will be distributed to needy families through the St. Elizabeth's food pantry. So far, the community garden has not produced any fruit or vegetables; it's expected the garden will yield 10-15 pounds of produce, once the harvest begins.

Description of Barriers Encountered and Identified or Proposed Solutions

The biggest barrier faced by the group was gaining the approval of church leadership to donate part of the vacant property to build the garden. After an extensive PowerPoint presentation, where examples of community gardens were shown to the priest and office manager, they finally agreed to provide access to the lot and construction was under way! Another barrier was the lack of an irrigation system in the vacant lot. A father of one youth group member heard about the problem, so he donated his time and materials to build a reliable and water-conserving irrigation system for the community garden.

Future Directions/Sustainable Success

The community garden is in good hands; as church members saw the construction of the garden, they volunteered to help maintain and take care of the garden. Several church members have made donations of materials and their time. We foresee this continuing to happen in the near future to sustain the garden. Plans for NEOP-funded classes during the first harvest of the garden have been established, so the community garden not only serves the church food pantry by growing fresh fruits and vegetables, but also as a tool to empower church members to plant gardens at home to support their family with healthy foods. Church members are excited and anxiously awaiting the first harvest from the community garden, and they take any opportunity to visit the garden.

Contact information about this Narrative

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